

Marx Yesterday and Today

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“We cannot now refuse the basic Marxist statements any more than a physicist can be a non-Newtonian, with the great further difference that, in the field of sociology, more generations must pass before an Einstein appears. He will not come before Marx’s work has born all its historical fruits.”¹ Rudolf Schlesinger arrived at this conclusion after working through all of Marx’s thought and the whole historical period which prepared it. From this conclusion we can take the opportunity to advance a few initial, incoherent considerations, *working hypotheses* to verify and deepen.

But first of all, a premise: any research project that wishes to take up the discourse of the validity of any fundamental Marxist propositions must confront Marx not with his own time, but with our time. *Capital* must be judged on the basis of the capitalism of today. This would dispense once and for all with the ridiculous petty-bourgeois banality according to which the work of Marx is at the same time a product and an explanation of society of small producers.

It is one of Marx’s fundamental theses that, on the social basis of capitalism, the historical process itself always operates through a logical procedure of abstraction. It strips away the casual, occasional, immediately subsumed elements of an object’s contingent presentation, discovering and then valorizing its permanent and necessary aspects, those which mark it as a specific product of a determinate historical reality, validated by the whole existing course of this reality. The process of development of capitalism is itself a process of simplification of its own history, always making its nature more pure, stripped of all the inessential contradictions to discover those *fundamental* contradictions which at the same time reveal it and condemn it. In this sense, capitalist development exposes the secret of capitalism. This secret, expressed from the point of view of the bourgeoisie, becomes the greatest ideological mystification of capitalism for everyone, within reach of everyone. It is therefore the greatest realization of capitalism itself, as well as of the ideological tools which give it an indefinite stability. Seen from the workers’ point of view, the secret comprises the most profound scientific comprehension of the true nature of capitalism, reached through the analyses of the latest results of its own history. This then becomes the discovery of the greatest contradictions of capitalism and therefore the theoretical tool of its coming overthrow. It is true the decisive historical clash between the working class and capital must take place on the basis of the most developed capitalism, and at the same time true that the class struggle between workerist *theory* and bourgeois *ideology* is expressed on the same terrain.

Another fundamental thesis of Marx’s is that the most developed level explains the least developed, and not vice-versa. Capitalism explains land rent and not vice-versa. Thus the verification of a thought does not take place on the social terrain which appears to have produced it, but that which then overtakes it; because it is this which in reality produces the thought. In this way Marx did not confront Hegel with the backward situation of semi-feudal Germany, but with the most advanced developments of capitalist Europe, and Ricardo was forced to give an urgent

¹ Rudolf Schlesinger, *Marx: His Time and Ours* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950): 432-3.

response to the problems his own time presented. Therefore the Marx of today cannot always continue to settle accounts with his former philosophical conscience², rather he must embed himself in an active clash with the most modern reality of contemporary capitalism, to understand it and to destroy it. This is the verification and the richness of workerism. It's no accident that today, while bourgeois thought builds existentialist romances on "the alienation of human nature," pausing ecstatically before a few unfortunate phrases of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; and it is no accident that workers' thought returns to *Capital* as the classical model of a scientific analysis of the present in the guise of a revolutionary struggle which wants to suppress and supercede it.

In a perceptive page of his book, Michaud found the courage to express in language what I believe to be a very difficult idea, even one in a state of confusion: "the recurrence in our age of an ideological situation in certain respects premarxist". Now, what does this mean? The answer to this question will cast some light on many darkened zones.

The thought of Marx, like all authentically revolutionary thought, tends to destroy something existing in order to create something new. There are two parts then, distinct and organically united at the same time, which comprise this thought. One is the "ruthless criticism of all that exists", which in Marx is expressed as the discovery of the mystifying procedure of bourgeois thought. Marx's thought is therefore a demystifying theory of capitalist ideology. The other part is "the positive analysis of the present", which sketches an alternative future at the highest level of scientific comprehension. The first is therefore the *critique of bourgeois ideology*, the other *the scientific analysis of capitalism*. In the work of Marx these two moments can be taken as logically distinct and chronologically successive, from the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* to *Capital*. This is not to say that they should always, in fact, be presented in this way or in this order. When Marx himself looked at classical political economy and retraced the path which it had taken in order to discover by analysis a few general abstract relations, he knew with certainty that it was not necessary to repeat that path. Rather, it was necessary to depart from those simple abstractions – the division of labour, money, value – to arrive once again at "the living whole": population, the nation, the state, the world market³. Today, therefore, since we have before us the culmination of Marx's work – *Capital* – we must take this as a point of departure: once we have arrived at the analysis of capitalism, we must depart from that analysis. So the research around a few other abstract determinations – alienated labour, modifications to the organic composition of capital, value in oligopolistic capital – must now be the point of departure to arrive at a new "living whole": the people, democracy, the political State of neocapitalism, the international class struggle. Not coincidentally, this is the path Lenin takes: from *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* to *The State and Revolution*. It's no coincidence, either, that all bourgeois sociology and all the reformist ideologies of the workers' movement are taking the opposite path.

But all of this is not enough. In order to take hold of the specific character which the analysis of capitalism assumes today, we must at the same time grasp the specific character of the critique of ideology. And here it is convenient to depart from a precise presupposition by using one of those tendentious maneuvers which is a positive characteristic of the science of Marx, a stimulus to new thought and an active intervention in practical struggle. The presupposition is this: that *an ideology is always bourgeois*, that is it is always a mystified reflection of the class struggle on the terrain of capitalism.

² Cf. Marx, "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859.

³ Cf. Marx, "1857 Introduction" in the *Grundrisse*.

Marxism has always been conceived of as the “ideology” of the workers’ movement. This is a fundamental error, because Marxism’s point of departure, its birthright, is precisely the destruction of *all* ideology through the critical destruction of all bourgeois ideologies. A process of ideological mystification is in fact possible only on the basis of modern bourgeois society: it was an remains the *bourgeois* perspective on bourgeois society. Whoever glances at the first pages of *Capital* will see that [ideology] is not a process of pure thought which the bourgeoisie knowingly *chooses* in order to mask the fact of exploitation. It is the process of exploitation itself, real and objective, which is the mechanism of capitalist development in all its phases.

Because of this, the working classes have no need of an “ideology”. Their existence as a class, that is their presence as a real antagonism within the capitalist system, their organization in revolutionary classes, does not tie them to the mechanism of [capitalist] development. Rather, it makes them independent from it and opposed to it. The more capitalism develops, the more the working classes are made *autonomous* from it; the more the system perfects itself, the more the working classes must become the greatest contradiction within the system, to the point of rendering it unviable, and making the revolutionary rupture that will liquidate or overcome it not only *possible* but *necessary*.

Marx is not the ideology of the workers’ movement, but its revolutionary theory, a theory which arises as the critique of bourgeois ideology and which must live every day as that critique – must continue to be the “ruthless criticism of all that exists”. A theory which was constructed as the scientific analysis of capitalism and which must continually consume this analysis, must at certain moments identify with it, when it is a question of recapturing lost territory. It must seek to fill the void, the detachment which operates through the development of things and the updating of research and tools. A theory which lives only in its function as revolutionary practice of the working class, which gives arms to its struggle and tools for its knowledge, isolates and expands the objectives of its action. Marx was and remains the *workers’* perspective on bourgeois society.

But then, if Marx’s thought is the revolutionary theory of the working classes, if Marx is the science of the proletariat, on what basis and by which means has a part of Marxism become a populist ideology, an arsenal of the banal commonplace justification of all possible compromises in the course of the class struggle? That’s a long story, yet it is evidently simply a fact that if this ideology is an ideologically determined part of – is the specific articulation of – the mechanism of capitalist development itself, then to accept this “ideological” dimension (the construction of a working class ideology) means nothing other than that the workers’ movement has itself become part [of the development of capitalism]; it is a passive articulation of that development. It has undergone a process of integration into the system, a process of integration which has various phases and various levels, but which nonetheless has the same consequences. It provokes different phases, different levels – different *forms* – of *reformist* practice, which ends up seeming, in appearance, implicit in the conception of the concept of the working classes itself. If ideology in general is always bourgeois, then an ideology of the working classes must always be reformist, and therefore it is the mystifying mode which is both the expression and at the same time the overturning of its revolutionary function.

If this is the case, then it follows that the process of demystification should today take place *within* Marxism itself, should express itself as a process of de-ideologizing Marxism. And we’re speaking here of Marxism, not of the work of Marx, about which we could say many different things. It is naturally a work of internal critique in Marx’s work to separate and to choose among the main directions which appear there, to grasp and to valorize the points in which scientific generalization is maximized and where, therefore, the analysis of capitalism achieves the full,

dynamic comprehension of the system, identifying and judging the fundamental tendencies which continually transform it and revolutionizes it from the inside. On the other hand, [it is equally a work of internal critique] to isolate and respect those parts in which scientific generalization seems unsuccessful and which are therefore the immediate generalizations of particular data, and therefore of a particular stage of capitalist development which ends up assuming the costume, the allegorical figure, of capitalism in all its complexity. But this is an internal critique which is different from the work of demystifying any Marxist theories; it represents in a certain sense Marx's autocritique. It has nothing to do with the work of Marx, but with certain parts of Marxism.

Today we are used to speaking with irony and contempt of *vulgar Marxism*, and we learned this from Marx himself. We note the different judgement and attitude that Marx takes when confronted with classical political economy, the reasons he called it *vulgar economy*. The merit of classical economy is the effort to bring back, through analysis, the intrinsic unity of the different forms of wealth, stripping them of the appearance in which they coexist independently of each other. This comprehends the intimate connection of the facts, freeing them from the multiplicity of their phenomenal forms. In this way, a specific process of mystification takes place which proceeds in parallel with the real development of social antagonisms and therefore with the objective level of the class struggle implicit in capitalist production. But within political economy – or, better, belonging to a certain stage of its development – there is an element which represents “the simple reproduction of the phenomenon” as simply the representation of itself. This is its vulgar element, which at a certain moment separates and isolates each phenomenon from the rest, like a particular exposition of the economy in general. However advanced the real contradictions, however complex their reproduction becomes on the plane of thought, however tiring and difficult the scientific analysis – to that extent the vulgar element is counterposed to all that work, like an element autonomous from it and substituting for it. The vulgar economy then becomes always *more apologetic* and “seeks to eliminate the chatter” of all the contradictory thoughts in which the real contradictions are expressed. When we read those pages of Marx and think of vulgar Marxism, we are tempted to conclude that everything has been said.

But we must add something essential. If it is true that the mystification reached to the very roots of Marxism, and if it is true that these are the objective reasons which have guided and still guide the process of vulgarization, then it becomes more urgent to isolate these objective reasons, to fix the prime material causes, not only to know them, but to combat them. We must be clear on this question. This is not a struggle merely at the level of theory. It is not a question of opposing a neoscholasticism of *pure Marxists* to the former academy of *vulgar Marxists*. We need to take the struggle to the level of reality, to conceive the theoretical task as one moment in the class struggle. Once we have recognized the necessity of, let us say, a *Marxist* purification of Marxism, once we have conquered this scientific level of the analysis of capitalism – which is today we must apply to the entire complex of international phenomena – once we have recuperated and once again verified the *scientific unity* of Marx's thought, which is expressed in the *organic unity* of economics and sociology, of political theory and practical struggle (and which must serve as a point of departure, or rather a point from which we must *leap*), then we can turn to find the real forces which must guide this process, the objective causes which necessarily produce it, the material reasons which will make theory itself, once again, a *material force*.

Today like never before the truth of the Leninist thesis stands: that there is no revolutionary movement without a revolutionary theory. When you hear everyone express the exigency of seeing and understanding the prospective *strategy* of the revolution, beyond the blind tactics of the day-by-day, then you know how great is the need for theory today. Theory today takes the whole arc

of antagonistic forces in the capitalist system and breaks it at a decisive point, thus contributing to the division of these forces, just as much as theory can contribute to their unity and homogeneity. Yet today as never before the reverse is also true: that revolutionary theory is not possible without a revolutionary movement. Here theory itself must lend a hand to all the practical work of recovering and reorganizing the only authentically subversive forces which live inside capitalism. These must become conscious of their existence and contribute to the material organization of the revolutionary instance which is expressed in their objective existence. At the limit, Marxism's process of demystification is impossible without *workers' power*. Indeed, workers' power – the *autonomous* organization of the working classes – is the *real* process of demystification, that is the *material* basis of revolution.

In this sense, the principle polemical objective of Marx today can no longer be *Vulgärökonomie*, but neither can it be the current form of vulgar Marxism. Because vulgar Marxism today maintains, as both presupposition and result, that it is itself the *Vulgärpolitik* of the workers' movement. It is against this vulgar politics that we must struggle. But the mode of this struggle must be well chosen, it cannot exhaust the task of contemporary Marxists. It is an obvious principle, though it is badly interpreted, that the internal criticism of the workers' movement must express itself *always* as the outward struggle against the class enemy. Therefore the internal criticism of Marxism must express itself *first of all* as the struggle against bourgeois thought. Thus today the destructive criticism of all the *neocapitalist* ideologies must be the necessary point of departure in order to arrive, once again, as the critique of *all* ideologies, including all reformist ideologies of the workers' movement itself. But we see today how the analysis of capitalism must in a certain sense precede the critique of ideology, in the sense that it must *ground* it. Thus we could say that today the positive analysis of the present – which means the theoretical elaboration of the fundamental prospects of the practical struggle as well as the recovery and the reorganization of the material forces that must carry it – must necessarily precede and ground the negative destruction of every ideological and political mystification.

Therefore, we must conclude that today's *ideological* situation is perhaps premarxist, but with the difference that the *theoretical* situation is perhaps pre-Leninist. I would say that today we do not need to traverse again the pre-Marx path prior to Marx, nor to take the post-Lenin one; we must perhaps – and I say this in a consciously provocative manner – we must perhaps once more make the leap from Marx to Lenin: from the analysis of contemporary capitalism to arrive at the elaboration of the theory of proletarian revolution on the basis of modern capitalism. The workers' revolution – with all its tools – must become, once again and concretely, the minimum programme of the workers' movement. Once already the working classes found Marx through Lenin: the result was the October Revolution. When this is repeated, the death knell will ring, as Marx would say, on the capitalism of the whole world.

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